

ARTICLE APPEARED
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NEWSWEEK
3 JANUARY 1983

The Plot to Kill Pope John Paul II

In the dimly lit lobby of the Hotel Vitosha in Sofia, Bulgaria, groups of swarthy men cluster on leather couches beneath an eternal pall of cigarette smoke. They converse in a thicket of waving arms and a babble of languages—Bulgarian, Arabic, English, German, French. Inside the hotel's garish bar, sleek, well-groomed prostitutes ply their trade under a benevolent dispensation from the Bulgarian security police. The Vitosha was built by the Japanese in 1979, and it quickly became a hotbed of Balkan intrigue, a haven for spies, drug smugglers, arms dealers and terrorists in transit between Europe and Asia Minor. The most celebrated guest in the Vitosha's short and shady history was a hard-eyed young Turkish hit man named Mehmet Ali Agca. He spent about two months there in 1980. And it was in room 910 of the Hotel Vitosha that Agca claims he met with another Turk on the run, Bekir Celenk, who offered him \$1.7 million to kill Pope John Paul II.

That is the crux of the story emerging from an Italian magistrate's painstaking investigation into the shooting of John Paul on May 13, 1981. Though the case remains unproven and much of the evidence is circumstantial, there is reason to believe that the Bulgarian secret police recruited Agca, through Turkish intermediaries, into the ranks of its hired guns, and that he was armed and supported by the Bulgarians when he shot the pope. "We have substantial evidence," Italian Justice Minister Clelio Darida told NEWSWEEK. "This isn't something we're inventing. Agca operated in close contact with the Bulgarians." That much seems clear, but did Bulgaria order Agca to shoot the pope? And was the Soviet KGB pulling Bulgaria's strings? If so, the trail may lead—ultimately and by all odds unprovably—to Yuri Andropov, the former secret-police chieftain who recently ascended to the leadership of the Soviet Union.

Despite heated denials from Moscow and Sofia, the Italians are convinced that the shooting of the pope was a deliberate plot, not a random act of madness. Agca, who was sentenced to life in prison for trying to kill the pope, began to sing a year ago. His word is hardly his bond. But on the basis of Agca's confession, Magistrate Ilario Martella, a careful and respected investigator, has begun to spread his net.

So far, the Italians have arrested a Bulgarian airline official, accusing him of helping to plan and carry out the attack. And they have charged two minor Bulgarian diplomats and four Turks as accomplices. Last week the Italian government threw its weight behind the theory that Moscow

wanted the outspoken John Paul killed to prevent him from interfering in Polish affairs. "Ali Agca's attack on the pope is to be considered as a real act of war in a time of peace, a precautionary and alternative solution to the invasion of Poland," Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio told Parliament. Though it wasn't saying so, the Vatican seemed to agree. "From the very beginning, [we were] absolutely convinced that the KGB was behind the plot," a high-ranking Vatican source told NEWSWEEK. "Now it turns out to be right."

Arms and Drugs: But why Bulgaria? "Why not Bulgaria?" responds Alessandro Pietromarchi, who has been in charge of the Italian Embassy in Sofia since his ambassador was recalled earlier this month. "Somebody obviously was stupid enough to try to kill the pope. Why shouldn't it have been Bulgaria?" In fact, Bulgaria is the most loyal of the Soviet satellites, and its secret service is as closely controlled by the KGB as any in Eastern Europe (page 27). Through an alliance with Turkish gangsters, the Bulgarians preside over a brisk international trade in arms and drugs, and they have a well-developed spy network in Italy. The Bulgarian secret service, the DS, has a reputation for ruthlessness; it specializes in what one senior Western intelligence agent calls "the rough end of the trade," and it is totally loyal to Moscow.

If Moscow is behind Agca and the Bulgarians, most Western governments probably would rather not know about it; the effects on arms control, trade and other East-West relations could be devastating. Perhaps for that reason, some in the West suggest that the link to Andropov could be disinformation spread by his foes overseas—or even inside the Kremlin. And some intelligence analysts note that the botched assassination attempt lacked the professionalism usually associated with Moscow's surrogate hit squads. For their part, the Russians are a picture of outraged

innocence. "Bourgeois propaganda and right-wing newspapers are spreading slanderous fabrications aimed at casting a shadow on socialist countries, particularly Bulgaria and the Soviet Union," said Central Committee spokesman Leonid Zamyatin in one of a series of extraordinary Soviet comments on the case.

And yet, who else would want the pope dead? "You are working in a world of mirrors where anything is possible and where anyone could be involved," says Lord Bethell, a British specialist on the Soviet Union. "You have to ask who would stand to gain most from the assassination of the pope, and the answer must be in the Soviet empire. He's a rallying point for the people in Poland, in Lithuania, in Czechoslovakia who want to throw off the Soviet yoke, and so he does make an obvious target. Combine the motive with the fact that the Bulgarians have a proven record of assassination, and you have to say there is at least a circumstantial case against them."

A Huge Cast: There is another, simpler explanation, of course: that Mehmet Ali Agca was merely a solitary lunatic. Certainly he tried to give that impression right after he shot the pope. The 23-year-old Agca identified himself as a Palestinian, an Islamic fundamentalist and an opponent of both American and Soviet imperialism. He said he had gone to London to kill "the king," but changed his mind when he discovered that the king was a woman. Islamic gallantry, he said, did not prevent him from shooting the pope. "I acted alone, and no one helped me," he boasted to interrogators. In fact, Agca had help from a huge cast of Bulgarians, Turks and others in the terrorist underground. And all the evidence suggests that he is neither stupid nor crazy.

Agca was born in 1958 to a poor family in Yesiltepe, a shantytown near Malatya, a provincial capital in eastern Turkey. He did well in school, worked hard to support his family and was not particularly religious; his brother says he rarely went to the mosque. Agca suffered from a mild form of epilepsy, and in high school his imperious manner earned him the nickname Emperor. "Terrorist organizations in Turkey normally recruit semiretarded illiterates as their hit men," says a former Turkish official. "Agca did not belong to this category. He was a clever, brave and determined man. He was